

for carlos, a letter from your father



I have never forgotten my tenth birthday. All my other childhood birthdays are lost somewhere in the mists of memory, blurred by sameness perhaps: the excitement of anticipation, the brief rapture of opening presents, and then the inevitable disappointment because birthdays, like Christmases, were always so quickly over. Not so my tenth.

It is not only because of the gleaming silver bike my mother gave me that I remember it so well. I tried it out at once, in my pyjamas. In an ecstasy of joy and pride I rode it round and round the block, hoping all my friends would be up early and watching out of their windows, admiring, and seething with envy too. But even my memory of that has diminished over the years. It was when I came home, puffed out and glowing, and sat down for breakfast, that my mother gave me something else too. It is this second gift that I have never forgotten. I can't honestly remember what happened to my beautiful bike. Either it rusted away at the back of the

garage when I grew out of it, or it was thrown away. I don't know. I do know that I still have this second gift, that I have never grown out of it and I will never throw it away.

She put down beside me on the kitchen table what looked at first like an ordinary birthday card. She didn't say who it was from but I could see that there was something about this card that troubled her deeply.

"Who's it from?" I asked her. I wasn't that interested at first — after all, birthday cards were never as intriguing as presents. She didn't answer me. I picked up the envelope. There, written in handwriting I did not know, was my answer: For Carlos, a letter from your father.

The envelope had clearly been folded. It was soiled and there was a tear in one corner. The word father was smeared and only just legible. I looked up and saw my mother's eyes filled with tears. I knew instantly she wanted me to ask no more questions. She simply said, "He wanted me to keep it for you, until your tenth birthday."

So I opened the card and read.

Dearest Carlos,

I want to wish you first of all a very happy tenth birthday. How I should love to be with you on this special day. Maybe we could have gone riding together as I once did with my father on my birthday. Was it my tenth? I can't remember. I do remember

we rode all day and picnicked on a high hill where the wind breathed through the long grass. I thought I could see for ever from that hill. Or maybe we could have gone to a football match and howled together at the referee and leapt up and down when we scored.

But then maybe you don't like horses or football. Why should you have grown up like me? You are a different person, but with a little of me inside you, that's all. I do know that your mother and I would have sung "Happy Birthday" to you and watched your eyes light up when you opened your presents, as you blew out the candles on your cake.

But all I have to give, all I can offer, is this letter, a letter I hope you will never have to read, for if you are reading it now it means that I am not with you, and have never been with you, that I died ten years ago in some stupid, stupid war that killed me and many, many others, and like all wars did no one any good.

Dying, Carlos, as you know, comes to each of us. Strangely, I am not afraid, not as much as I have been. I think maybe that love has conquered my fear. I am filled with so much love for you, and such a sadness too, a sadness I pray you will never have to know. It is the thought of losing you before I even get to know you that saddens me so. If I die in this terrible place then we shall

never meet, not properly, father to son. We shall never talk. For a father to be parted from his son is always a terrible thing, yet if it has to be, then in a way I would rather it was now, this way, this soon. To have known you, to have watched you grow and then to have lost you, must surely be even worse. Or am I just telling myself that?

You will know me a little, I suppose, perhaps from photographs. And your mother may well have told you something about me, of my childhood, how I grew up on the farm in Patagonia and was riding horses almost before I could walk. Maybe she told you of our first meeting when her car had a puncture and I was riding by and stopped to change her tyre for her. I am quite good at tinkering with motors – you have to be on a farm. But I took a lot longer to change that tyre than I needed to – if you know what I mean. By the time I had finished I knew I loved her and wanted to spend my whole life with her. Later I learnt that she went home afterwards and told her sister that she'd met this young man on the road who had nice eyes, and a nice horse, but who talked too much and was hopeless at changing tyres. Anyway, much against the wishes of our families, who all said we were far too young, we got married six months later.

For a short while life seemed so sweet, so perfect. Then came

my conscription papers and separation and the long weeks of military training. But I didn't mind that much because it was something we all had to do, and because I knew it would soon be over. I had so much to look forward to, most of all the birth of you. All the talk in the barracks was of war. I think we talked ourselves into this war — perhaps it is always like that.

I came home to see you just once, and now, only a few weeks later, I find myself sitting here in the Malvinas, high in the rocky hills above Stanley Town. Night is coming on and I am waiting for battle.

As I write this I am so cold I cannot feel my feet. I can hardly hold the pencil I am writing with. The British are coming. They know where we are. They have been bombarding us all day. We cannot see them, but we know they are out there somewhere. We expect them to attack tonight. All of us know in our hearts, though we do not say it, that this will be the last battle. In battle men die. I do not want to think of that, but it is difficult not to. The officers say we can win, that if we can only hang on, reinforcements will soon be here. But we all know better. They have to say that, don't they?

I can see you now in my head as you were, three long months ago, on the morning I left home. When I looked down upon



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you that last time, cradled in your mother's arms, I remember I tried to picture you as a grown boy. I couldn't then, and I still can't. For me you are that sleeping child, yawning toothlessly, fists clenched, frowning through your milk-soaked dreams. But grow up you will, grow up you have, and now that you are old enough I want to tell you myself how I came to be here, fighting a war in this dreadful place, how I died so far from home. I want to speak to you directly. At least you will know me a little because you can hear my voice in my writing. It is true that I am writing to you also because it helps me – if I think of you I do not think of the battle ahead. I have already written to your mother. She will have read her letter ten years ago now. This is your letter, Carlos, our hello you might call it, and our goodbye.

I had not thought it would end like this. Like all my comrades I believed what we were told, what we saw on the television, what we read in the papers. The Malvinas belonged to Argentina, and that much is true. They had been stolen from us, they said. We would restore the honour of Argentina and take them back. Our flag would fly again over Stanley. It would be easy, they told us. We would attack in force, overwhelm the British garrison in a few hours. There would be very little shooting. The Malvinas would be ours again, Argentinian, and

then we could all go home. I was excited – we all were excited and proud too, proud that we were the ones chosen to do this for our country. It was all going to be so simple.

And it began well. We came ashore in our landing craft. No one fired a shot at us. As we marched into Stanley we saw our flag already flying high over the town. The British marines in their green berets sat huddled by the roadside dejected, defeated. The war was over almost before it had begun. Or so we thought. We had won. The Malvinas were ours again. How the people back home would be cheering, I thought. What heroes we would be when we returned. How we laughed and sang and drank that first night. We did not feel the cold in the wind, not then.

In those early days on the Malvinas, in that first flush of victory, the islands seemed to us like a paradise, a paradise regained. Our paradise. Argentinian.

Yet here I sit only a month or two later and we know that we are about to lose the last battle. The ships did not come. The supplies did not come. Instead the British came, their planes first, then their ships, then their soldiers. We did what we could, Carlos, but we were raw conscripts, poorly fed, poorly equipped, badly led, and we were up against determined fighters. From the

moment they sank the great battleship *Belgrano*, the pride of our navy, we knew it could only end one way. I lost my cousin in that ship. I saw men die, good men, my friends, men with wives and mothers and children.

I grew up fast in the terrible weeks that followed. I learnt what I should already have understood, that in wars people really do kill one another. I did not hate those I have killed and those who try to kill me do not hate me either. We are like puppets doing a dance of death, our masters pulling the strings, watched by the world on television. What they don't know is that the puppets are made of flesh, not wood. War, Carlos, has only one result: suffering.

When I heard the British had landed at San Carlos Bay I thought of you, and I prayed in the church in Stanley that I would be spared to see you again. They had no candles there. So I went out and bought a box of candles from the store and then I came back and lit them and prayed for me, for you, for your mother. An old lady in a scarf was kneeling at prayer. I saw her watching me as I came away. Her eyes met mine and she tried to smile. My English is not that good, but I remember her words. They echo still in my head.

“This is not the way,” she said. “It is wrong, wrong.”

“Yes,” I replied, and left her there.

That was a few days ago now. Since then we have been stuck up here on these freezing hills above Stanley Town, digging in and waiting for the British, who come closer every day. And the bitter wind, from which we cannot hide, chills us to the bone, sapping the last of our strength and most of our courage too. What courage we have left we shall fight with, but courage will not be enough.

I must finish now. I must fold you away in an envelope and face whatever I must face. As you have grown up, you may not have had a father, but I promise you, you have always had a father’s love.

Goodbye, dear Carlos.

And God bless.

Papa ✚

